



Inside this Issue:

1. Editorial
2. Forthcoming Events
3. National InterFaith.
4. RC- Muslim Dialogue
5. Srebrenica Remembered
6. Sicily Exhibition .
7. MENA speaker
8. CIF Information.

Quotable Quote:

“ True friendship comes when silence between people is comfortable ”.

Anonymous

Cheltenham InterFaith tries to create space for people of faith to speak and sometimes be silent together.

Quarterly Newsletter of Cheltenham Inter Faith; reflections, reviews and news from Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. UK.

A new age of extremism?

Are we living in a dawning age of extremism? Professor Hazel Bryan in an inaugural lecture at the University of Gloucestershire thinks so. Addressing the topic “Education, Extremism and the Reinterpretation of Social Democracy” she gave many instances of the general use of the word “extremism” or variants of it in official reports, recommendations and other documents as well as in the media - and all within a very recent time span. It is now accepted thinking that the social democracy achieved by the philosophers and politicians in our country over the last four centuries has great difficulty in securing a place for religious groups who do not accept its value.

The problem is that those who hold to religious fundamentals can so readily reject the activity of the Holy Spirit outside their religions and in the modern secular world. Such people retreat into their religious fortresses and refuse to engage with those outside. In the name of freedom they can demand exemption from legal requirements in all matters of equality including gender and sexuality. A friend of mine does not engage in interfaith activity because he believes it is a matter of smiling acceptingly at expressions of discrimination in the name of one religion or another. So how can we best strive for universal human values?

Speakers & Events

Penny Faust is Chairman of the Oxford Friendship Walk and has invited members and friends of CIF

Adele Owen is Director of Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS).

Harry Hagopian

Fellow of the Sorbonne, Paris. Middle East Advisor to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England & Wales. He is an Armenian from Lebanon. Executive Director of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Committee 1996-2001. Popular writer, international speaker and broadcaster. EU-based public lawyer.

Georgina Jardim,

University of Gloucestershire, founder of Holy Book Group, Gloucester, Trustee of Cheltenham Arts Festival. Books include “Muslims for Universal Values”

Diary Dates

*Thursday 2nd June. **Annual Oxford InterFaith Friendship Walk** 6.15 – 8.15pm From Richmond Road Synagogue to Central Mosque. Reflections, Readings along the way concluding with a meal provided by the Mosque and Jewish community. Transport from Cheltenham.*

*Monday 6th June Adele Owen, **“Religious Needs of Refugees”** 7.30pm. Cheltenham Friends Meeting House..*

*Thursday 21st July **Annual Dinner. “The Real China”**, 13 The Brewery, Cheltenham. £11.45 inclusive. Book now.*

*Sunday 14th August 3.00pm. **Visit to The Faith Garden**, Cheney Manor, Swindon Tour, Talk, Refreshments. By Invitation Swindon InterFaith.*

*Wednesday 21st September Harry Hagopian: **“The Middle East–Future Prospects”**. 7.30pm Cheltenham Friends Meeting House*

*October date tba. Georgina Jardim **“Scriptural Reasoning among people of different faiths”** 7.30pm Cheltenham Friends Meeting House*

The National InterFaith Network

Dr Harriett Crabtree is the Director of the IFN and spoke to CIF in March following the Annual General Meeting in March. She gave a lively survey of national activities and drew attention to the increasing importance of religious identity in the world where knowledge and mutual understanding can enable positive values to be shared.

InterFaith development is being furthered by meetings, discussions and shared faith initiatives. The Cheltenham InterFaith website was praised for its contribution.

In universities, colleges and schools there were examples of interfaith learning and encounter. Were these achieving their aims? The answer was generally “Yes” but amongst under 30’s there were instances of suspicion of perceived extremism by individuals and groups.

Following the Meeting Dr Crabtree returned to London for a visit to the House of Lords to provide input on interfaith matters.

In May CIF Chair Peter Slocombe and Committee member Sarah Marr, who represents CIF on the national body, attended the Launch Meeting for the Inter Faith Week Toolkit in London organized by the IFN. The Week will run from 13 to 20 November to include two Sundays, one being Remembrance Sunday. This gives further opportunity to remember the soldiers and civilians of different faiths and beliefs who fought for the freedoms we enjoy today. Cheltenham InterFaith will value the tool kit as planning soon begins for the local celebration organized jointly with the University of Gloucestershire Chaplaincy and the Cheltenham Borough Council.

It was an enjoyable day with many and various world religions represented and a good vegetarian lunch. The warmth of friendship and the spontaneous joy and liveliness of the Day were a testimony to the well-spring of faith and good will that inspires so many people of faith and their leaders today and about which little is recorded in the media.

Shared Beliefs for Social and Political Life

Catholic and Muslim experts in interreligious dialogue on 7th May issued a statement following their fruitful meeting in the Vatican. They outlined eight points of convergence.

1. We share beliefs and moral values. What we hold in common is greater than what divides us and forms a solid basis for peaceful and fruitful living together.
2. We believe in the humanizing and civilizing role of our religions when their followers adhere to the principles of worshipping God and loving and caring for each other.
3. We believe God bestowed upon everyone dignity and inalienable rights. These should be recognised, guaranteed and protected by law.
4. We pledge solidarity with all in need regardless of ethnic, religious or cultural background.
5. Our help for the poor and needy should be offered out of compassion and never used to proselytise.
6. The youth have the right to proper education that prepares them to be good citizens, respectful of diversity.
7. Our world, our “common humanity” needs the steady efforts of its inhabitants to be a place where all can live peacefully together sharing resources and mindful of future generations.
8. We express solidarity with all who suffer from violence and armed conflict. Respect for international law, dialogue, justice, mercy, compassion are values and adequate means to achieve peace and harmony.

Amongst the participants was the former Canadian Ambassador to the Holy See, Dr Anne Leahy. She said “there was a meeting of minds. We hear too much about what our differences are so it’s important to witness to these basic values we share to counter the negativity”. The Catholic participants came from Algeria, Canada, Iraq, Kenya, Syria and Indonesia. The Muslims from Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon.

Srebrenica Remembered

CIF recently received a letter from the South West Regional Chair of the charity “Remembering Srebrenica” which seeks to teach UK citizens of the consequences of ethnic hatred and religious intolerance.

Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the systematic murder of 8,372 Muslim men and boys in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, a crime that was ruled a genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Bosnia had been one of the most multicultural and tolerant societies in Europe at the time that the war began.

The charity’s main objectives are:

1. to remember the genocide victims by marking the annual UN mandated Memorial Day on 11th July.
2. to learn community lessons from survivors by taking UK citizens to Bosnia.
3. to work with community champions to tackle hatred and intolerance.

The local branch of the charity has put together an inaugural delegation to Bosnia including religious, political and community leaders from Gloucestershire to learn at first hand from the survivors of the genocide. The local MP, Alex Chalk, agreed to join the delegation.

In terms of practicalities, the Charity is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and all costs are met by their funding. Delegates are asked to make a small donation of £100 per trip and to meet their own costs of transport to and from Heathrow Airport.

The charity would like to hold a commemorative event during Srebrenica Memorial Week (10th-17th July) that could include a Peace Walk between different religious buildings but they are very open to suggestions and would like to engage with us in considering ways to promote their work.

The Chair of the local branch, who lives in our area, is Anousheh Anousheh Haghdadi and we look forward to a talk about the Charity’s work in January.

Sicily - Culture and Conquest

Much to be recommended is the current exhibition at the British Museum on the island that is at the heart of the Mediterranean. Over the centuries it has seemed alluring to successive waves of settlers and conquerors, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Normans. Those who made their home on Sicily created a rich and extraordinarily diverse cultural heritage which are shown through some 200 remarkable objects from temples, churches and palaces.

Today Sicily is perceived as impoverished and the crime-ridden home of the mafia, even described as uncivilised by a well-known traveller over a century ago. So it is refreshing to see this land and its people through new eyes and to realize that an extraordinary period of enlightenment occurred under Norman rule in the 12th century AD when Sicily became the most culturally innovative and religiously tolerant place in Europe.

The fertility and richness of the land encouraged the Norman conquest which began in 1061 and had the blessing of the Pope. The conquest took some thirty years to complete and faced little resistance. Latin Christians, Greeks and Jews capitulated without a fight and the Normans had the support of local Muslims, many of whom served in the Norman army and provided personal body guards for Roger, the King of Sicily.

Roger established good relations with Islamic North Africa as well as with Rome and Byzantium and sought to establish an inclusive society. Indeed coins minted in this period continued their former appearance with inscriptions in Arabic from the former Islamic period when the “shehada” or Muslim profession of faith was shown.

The exhibition highlights the artistic achievements of the invading 8th century Greeks with their awe-inspiring temples but the witness to multi-faith and multi-culturalism under the Normans seemed to me more relevant for today. *PS*

The Middle East Today

Dr Harry Hagopian, advisor on International Affairs to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, has offered to come and speak to Cheltenham InterFaith in September. His brief involves much world travel and first hand contact with parties in conflict. Working in a consultancy role on political, ecumenical and interfaith issues relating to the Middle East and North Africa as a public international lawyer, he is qualified in dispute resolution.

Harry is well known to local Roman Catholics from his many podcast interviews on the website of the Diocese of Clifton and he usually accompanies Bishop Declan Lang, our local RC Bishop, who chairs the Bishops' International Affairs Department. Such visits have been made to Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Gaza.

From 1996 till 2001 he was Executive Director of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Committee based in Jerusalem and focusing on the future of that city.

He is an Armenian, speaks six languages and is a Fellow of the Sorbonne III University in Paris. He is a public speaker and excellent communicator who has an engaging and interesting style. He has written extensively on the Middle East and North Africa and is currently working on a book on the dynamics and the future prospects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

If Dr Hagopian can come, work commitments and emergency crises not preventing and the practicalities of a visit sorted, then we will be in for a good, informative evening that will be entirely topical, help us understand better the interfaith challenges of the MENA region and be worthy of a good audience of not just CIF members but friends and all interested and concerned about peace in a region that has long been a tinder box.

Dr Harry Hagopian speaks to us on Wednesday 21st September.

“Handling the texts” -Chris Hewer returned to Cheltenham for a Severn Forum talk in May at the University when the CIF chairman gave a vote of thanks from all interested in InterFaith harmony and understanding. The hermeneutical challenge of handling Christian and Islamic texts was shown to be a demanding and vital exercise, essential for furthering world-wide community harmony. The Bible and the Qur'an and related writings had to be seen for the very different works that they were. They could not be simply equated. They also had to be interpreted in terms of today's world with its contemporary knowledge and insights. Papers given in Ireland and Pakistan on the subject were available.

The website for CIF is managed by Chris Davis, our web master. The newsletter, notices and items of interest appear, along with links to Inter Faith sites. www.cheltenhaminterfaith.org.uk

CIF welcomes suggestions, proposals and ideas for topics, speakers and visits and links with other groups as well as news of local interfaith activity, which we are happy to promote.

Cheltenham Inter Faith is a membership association open to all with a commitment to interfaith understanding. It is a member of the Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom

Annual subscription £10 (guests £2).

Meetings monthly at The Friends Meeting House, Warwick Place, Portland Street, Cheltenham or at other venues as advertised.

We also advertise and support some meetings and gatherings that promote inter faith understanding in Cheltenham and beyond. These may be listed in our newsletter diary and indicated as such.

Visits: We like to visit regional places of worship and prayer to learn at first hand of the practices and beliefs of faith communities.

CIF is run by a committee elected at an Annual General Meeting



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